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The Future of Pakistan

South Asia, Pakistan, Middle East

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INTRODUCTION

Pakistan's future is important to its neighbors and to states near and far for at least six reasons.

- It is a nuclear weapons state with a very bad record of proliferation.
- Pakistan has, as a matter of state policy, actively supported jihadist and militants in its neighbors and has either turned a blind eye or professes incapacity when it comes to opposing militants active in Europe and even in friendly China.
- The identity-based dispute with India continues, and it is likely that new crises between the two will take place sometime in next several years.
- Pakistan's economy is stagnating, complicated by the massive damage due to the recent earthquake in 2005 and floods in 2010.
- Its demographic indicators look bad and are worsened by a poor economy – long gone are the days when Pakistan was knocking on the door of middle income status.
- Pakistan could be a major disruptive force in South, Southwest and Central Asia, ruining India's peaceful rise and destabilizing the Persian Gulf and Central Asian regions.

With its declining social indicators, crumbling infrastructure, and the military's misplaced priorities, Pakistan is a deeply troubled state and, were it not for the large number of talented Pakistanis, one would be tempted to judge it to be in terminal decline. This is an important point: the Pakistani state is enfeebled, but Pakistani society is as vigorous as ever, manifest particularly in its provincial cultures and talented elite, but here is a yawning gap between aspiration and actual performance.

Earlier projects that looked at Pakistan's future were cautiously optimistic, although a group of experts convened by the U.S. National Intelligence Council (NIC) was decidedly downbeat.^[1] The Appendix section of this report contains a review and critique of these studies.

This essay builds upon *The Idea of Pakistan*, which devoted one chapter to the future. It took me a full week to write the very last sentence of that book, as I agonized over its exact language. I concluded:

Before writing Pakistan off as the hopelessly failed state that its critics believe it to be, Washington may have one last opportunity to ensure that this troubled state will not become America's biggest foreign policy problem in the last half of this decade. [2]

In 2006, the concerns were evident, even as President Pervez Musharraf was still riding towards his non-*rendezvous* with a Nobel Peace prize. There is ample evidence that Pakistan is turning a decisive corner, that the original idea of a moderate, reasonably secular and competitive state is out of reach, and that some other kind of Pakistan will emerge. While not entirely giving up on the reconstruction of the Jinnah's moderate version of Pakistan, it now seems unlikely. [3] Some Pakistanis are now deeply pessimistic about their country. Even a former army chief and close associate of Zia-ul-Haq, has written scathingly of the entire spectrum of Pakistani political and social life:

Pakistan is a wounded nation, hurt by both friends and foes. Her national body is riddled with injuries of insult, neglect and arrogance inflicted by dictators and democrats; judges and generals, the bureaucrats and media. None of them are blame-free. [4]

The Idea of Pakistan examined alternative futures. These included the continuation of an "establishment"-dominated Pakistan (this was a state in which democratic forms – if not democracy – were maintained), and a state with stable if not good relations with Afghanistan and India. Other futures included overt military rule, and the emergence of a truly "Islamic" state, or even a full-fledged democracy. Also examined were the possibilities of a Pakistan in which the provinces of the Northwest Frontier Province, Sindh, Balochistan, or the Mohajir-dominated areas of urban Sindh and Karachi broke away from the Punjabi core. Finally, the possibility of Punjab itself splitting was discussed, as well as the results of a new and major war with India.

The likely percentages that could be attached to these outcomes would have come to over 100 percent because some futures could occur simultaneously or sequentially. [5] These projections had no specific time frame, the consensus of participants in this project being that extreme cases could be ruled out for the next few years.

Uncertainty about Pakistan's trajectory persists and Pakistan's state and society are even less "knowable" today, partly because firsthand research in Pakistan is now far more difficult than it was even a few years ago. [6]

Partnering this essay, are a group of fourteen papers written by specialists on Pakistan. These experts – European, American, Pakistani, and one Indian – were asked to name and discuss the underlying factors that would shape Pakistan's future, and then set forth the most likely of these futures. This approach was chosen over sectoral analyses (e.g., the economy, the party system, the military), to encourage the group to focus on the range and variety of likely futures. There are important variations in their response, and several participants treated the same events or factors very differently - instructive in itself. A few contributors were asked to focus on a particular issue, problem or factor. The papers are therefore not entirely comparable. [7]

I have refrained from attaching numbers to trends and predictions, but the language should make it clear that the continuation of the present establishment-dominated state – "muddling through" in Jonathan Paris' term – is the most likely future, or, more precisely that there is the possibility of several kinds of muddling through, albeit with a greater likelihood of more extreme and unpleasant futures. [8] Nor am I confident that the United States has "one last chance" to get Pakistan right – but then, in 2003, even this argument was qualified by saying that it "may" have one last

chance. The policy implications of this analysis are, however, clear: we know less about whether there will be one last chance than we know about the consequences of failure, thus a good-faith effort is essential. Failure is not an option, even though it may occur despite the best efforts of Pakistanis and outside powers. The usual question is “whither” Pakistan, but the real one is “whether” Pakistan: what kind of Pakistan will emerge from the present chaos, with recent events, notably the assassination of Salman Taseer, highlighting Pakistan’s decline as a coherent and purposeful state.

Finally, on a personal note, I have been studying Pakistan since 1964 and visiting it regularly since 1978 but have never lived there for more than a month at a time. This essay was written in draft form in May 2010 but substantially revised after a lengthy trip to Pakistan and India in September and October 2010. So, my impressions of the society and culture are limited, but I hope reasonably accurate, certainly more so than that of the many instant experts that have written about Pakistan in the last five or six years. I have depended greatly on my Pakistani friends and acquaintances, but even they are at a loss to explain some of the new and more shocking trends now underway in their country. I hope this study does not offend and, paraphrasing Arthur Koestler, in the long run a hurtful truth is better than a pleasant lie. In Pakistan’s case, there have been too many lies - whether by Americans, Pakistanis or others - and this is the time for some hurtful truths.^[9]

[1] U.S. National Intelligence Council, *Global Trends 2025: a Transformed World* (Washington, DC: National Intelligence Council, November 2008).

[2] Cohen, *The Idea of Pakistan* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2004), p. 328.

[3] One of the few to make a case for Jinnah’s conception of Pakistan was the conservative Indian politician Jaswant Singh, which led to his expulsion from the Bharatiya Janata Party. See Jaswant Singh, *Jinnah: India, Partition, Independence* (New Delhi: Rupa, 2009).

[4] General K. M. Arif, *Estranged Neighbors: India-Pakistan, 1947-2010* (Islamabad: Dost Publications, 2010).

[5] For a survey of predictions about Pakistan see Cohen, and also Hasan Askari Rizvi, “At the Brink?” in *Bellagio Pakistan Papers*, Brookings, 2010. For a discussion of prediction methodologies in the policy world, see Philip Tetlock, “Reading Tarot on K Street,” Sept.-Oct. 2009, *National Interest*.

[6] See for example the case of David Hansen, a Norwegian scholar who was arrested and nearly sent to prison or worse; Hansen’s plight is described in his fine dissertation, “Radical Ideas, Moderate Behavior,” a Ph.D. thesis awarded in November 2010 by the University of Oslo. As for the rest, first-hand scholarship on Pakistan has declined as the research environment has become more difficult.

[7] The paper-writers and conference participants were originally termed a “Delphi” panel, after the methodology used by the Rand Corporation to predict events in the 1960s. However, as one participant wryly noted, the Oracle of Delphi was a woman, and her pronouncements were both cryptic and easily misunderstood, leading to tragic consequences for those who consulted her.

[8] Jonathan Paris, *Prospects for Pakistan* (London, U.K.: Legatum Institute, 2010).

[\[9\]](#) See the analysis by Howard and Teresita Schaffer about the role that lies and dissembling plays in American relations with Pakistan, *Pakistan Negotiates with America: Riding the Roller-Coaster* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, March, 2011).